

## Growing spiritually as we grow older

When my friend asked me to help with a workshop that would deal with aging and spirituality, I did not hesitate to accept. I have to admit that I accepted for rather selfish reasons. I felt that the process would be of personal spiritual benefit. As the two of us read, interviewed, prepared and compared notes, we were surprised how frequently "facing our own mortality" was identified as the focus of adult spirituality. We decided early on that our workshop would have to include that focus.

The readings, the interviews and the preparations went well; the workshop received good evaluations. For me the personal homework, the nurturing of my own spirituality is still a challenge. Facing my own mortality is difficult; the cognitive acceptance of the necessity of the process far outstrips my ability to integrate what I am learning into my emotional and spiritual life. There is reference to dealing with our own mortality in each of the articles of this issue, but Stella Dyck, who has worked with many terminally ill persons professionally, speaks specifically to the issue. There are practical suggestions to help us relate to those for whom terminal illness is a present reality.

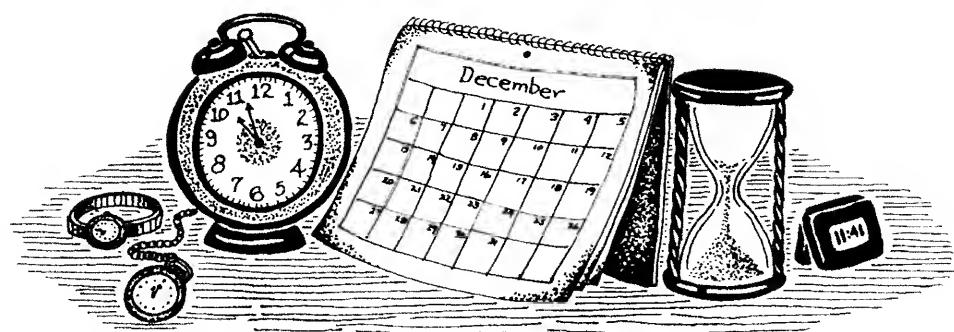
Although coming to terms with our own mortality is a big part of the discussion of aging and spirituality, there are other challenges as well. Eugene Bianchi, in his book *Aging as a Spiritual Journey*, speaks about the tasks of the aging adult. In addition to confronting the boundaries of life and death, he lists grappling with hope and despair, and puzzling over decisions of good, bad and mixtures of both.

In order to have hope instead of despair as we grow older, we need to let go of anger and bitterness, and deal with the guilt and the grief of unfinished business. There is a fable retold by Lewis Smedes in his book *Forgive and Forget*, that explains forgiveness in terms of an angel removing the pebbles of hatred from the heart, one by one, as one chooses to see the offending person with new and "magic" eyes. Lewis Smedes says forgiving is life's toughest work. In this issue Katie Funk Wiebe's, "When I am old I want to be an elder" speaks with practical and personal wisdom to issues of forgiveness and growth.

When we puzzle over decisions of good, bad and mixtures of both, we need the spiritual resources of prayer, meditation, journaling and friendship. Irene Wiens, who is a resource person for spiritual formation retreats, offers help for "Tending the Inner Life."

While we are pondering the decisions of our lives we have the opportunity to share those moments and events that have special significance to us, with our children, grandchildren and congregation. I would commend Katie Funk Wiebe's books as an example of how to process and share the richness of the events of life. I would commend her books as well for the practical and spiritual advice they contain. Many of her books are listed in the bibliographies provided in this issue.

All of the articles and many of the books listed in the bibliographies take me back to my first observation. Aging is a spiritual journey that has personal challenges for me. I still have a long way to go until I can say that I am comfortable with my own mortality. Robert Fulghum, in his book *From Beginning to End: The Rituals of our Lives*, tells of his coming to terms with his mortality. When he purchased a cemetery plot, he took a chair and sat on the plot for a long while and thought about the meaning of his life. He says: "Sitting for an afternoon on his own grave, he has had one of those potent experiences when the large



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pattern of life has been unexpectedly reviewed: the past, birth, childhood, adolescence, marriage, career, the present and the future. He has confronted finitude—the limits of life. The fact of his own death lies before him and beneath him—raising the questions of the when and the where and the how of it. What shall he do with his life between now and then?"

For all of us there are moments when we confront the boundaries between life and death. One such moment came to me rather unexpectedly one autumn day several years ago. I decided to visit one of my husband's aging relatives in the hospital. Although I knew that he was in very poor health, I did not know that he was dying. When I reached his room, his wife was with him. She met me at the door and said that she had already called the immediate family. I asked her if she wanted me to stay until they arrived. She nodded. As we waited those next minutes, watching her

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husband struggle his last battle, it seemed to me that hours were passing. When the family arrived, I excused myself. I was a block from the hospital when I realized I was running. That was when I acknowledged how uncomfortable I had been in the face of death. Facing death and our own mortality is part of growing spiritually.

My conversations with the writers of this issue have provided me with personal challenges. May God's Spirit guide each of us in the challenges of our spiritual journey.

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**"Imagine a society where the reverence for aging inspires us as much as the passion for staying youthful!"**

**"Will we become as the elderly who tend to focus on diminishments and complain, or will we grow into the wisdom and grace of 'an elder' with gratitude for life and our own story?"**

by Irene Wiens

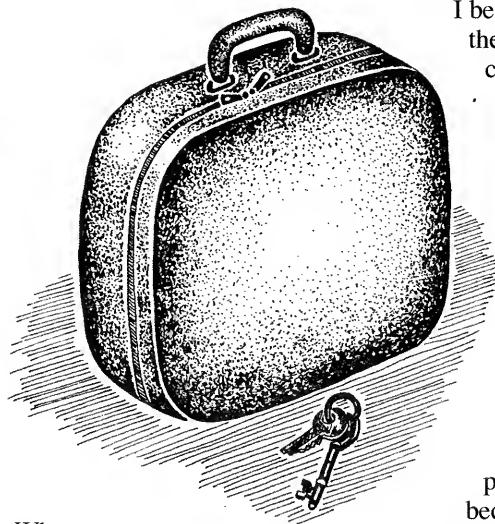
## Tending the Inner Life

Recently I awoke recalling a dream: I am anxiously looking for my suitcase. I can clearly visualize it—a nearly round, yellowish-tan, soft leather case. However, it is lost. How will I handle this tragedy? I stop to evaluate. It will be all right. My clothing can be replaced. I have some backup money to help me out. Then I stop short when I realize my keys are in the case! I will be unable to enter my home—my childhood home on the farm.

I recorded the dream in my journal and pondered. What needs to be unlocked in my life? Is there something from my childhood that needs to be retrieved? Am I ignoring the inner child with its needs for spontaneity and nurture? Have I lost the keys to a source of healing and growth? I admitted I was feeling stuck and stagnant, longing for inner movement. I wondered about the possible message of the dream.

Several days later I attended a workshop called "Conscious Aging—Spiritual Eldering" where the gems of wisdom flowed. Imagine a society where the reverence for aging inspires us as much as the passion for staying youthful! The elder years can be the best season of one's life. There is the gift of time—time to live a more creative and contemplative life. Yes, there are losses, but in facing them we come alive more deeply.

In this workshop we were invited to notice signs of our own aging and how we meet those experiences. Will we become as the elderly who tend to focus on diminishments and complain, or will we grow into the wisdom and grace of "an elder" with gratitude for life and our own story? We were gently led into life review work with each person sharing a memory from early childhood. A host of memories and reflections surfaced and touched my soul. I felt that a key to a storehouse of treasures of my life had opened up for me. The inner movement I had longed for, in answer to my dream, had come.



I believe it is time to be reclaiming the image of the older, wise, challenging woman, the elder or crone, in contrast to the woman over-the-hill, devalued, with little to contribute. Are there such scriptural models for us? I think of Elizabeth in her mentoring role who blesses Mary, as well as the unborn child, as they spend three months of their extraordinary pregnancies together. How the storytelling must have flowed! Eighty-four-year-old Anna, prophetess and contemplative, becomes the first evangelist

proclaiming good news of the child to all who will listen. And there is Mary who ponders and treasures in her heart the mysteries of her son's birth, childhood and, no doubt, the mysteries of his ministry, death and ever-present Spirit. Think of the storytelling and spiritual eldering she must have done among the apostles and believers in the early church!

How can we, too, develop contemplative living—being attentive to life and receiving its gifts—so as to pass on the stories gleaned from our own lives? Although interiorization may look like withdrawal from the world, it enables us to move forward with hospitality, compassion and clarity of purpose. The inner resources will form the basis of our original contributions to the world.

Although there are well-proven tools for tending the inner life, they are guidelines meant to be used with creativity and discretion. I have found that it is important to honor times of struggle and disorientation that are bound to come in midlife when Scripture and prayer may seem lifeless and when we learn to wait for God. At those times spiritual reading, going for walks in nature, or even just sitting may nourish the soul. I have come to appreciate that there are many ways of caring for our souls such as through how we decorate our homes in simple but tasteful ways; through art, music or literature; through walking in nature; through cooking, gardening or other creative hobbies; or through friendships, celebrations, meaningful rituals or common worship.

In our journey to greater wholeness and freedom we may find ourselves moving toward more adequate images of God. One example is moving from a God whom we strive to

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please to a God who loves us as we are. An image that has nurtured me is from the needlepoint art of Liz Wenger entitled "God So Loved the World." A human figure is sitting cross-legged cradling a large globe on her lap, embracing it in her arms and tenderly pressing one cheek against it. She wears a ring symbolizing her loving commitment to me and to each human being on this globe. Or we may move to a God who is nameless and beyond images, the I Am Who I Am.

The following are a few time-honored tools of spirituality to help us to tend the inner life and to prepare us for conscious aging and spiritual eldering. We can also explore local resources such as retreat places and spiritual guides to accompany us on the journey.

#### **1. Praying our daily lives**

- To prepare yourself do whatever helps you to experience unconditional love—perhaps lighting a candle or breathing in the unconditional love of Jesus or God—and review the events of the day from that perspective.
- Give thanks to God for the moments in the day for which you are most grateful—consider events and especially feelings you had.
- Allow the moments in the day for which you are least grateful to surface and share those with God in whichever way you wish. Your response may be one of confession or even lament—expressing deep sorrow, anger or pain, as the Psalmist did or as Hannah in her heart-rending prayer did—or of turning these things over into God's loving care.
- Conclude with a time of offering your needs or desires to God and breathing in God's everlasting, unconditional and healing love.

This pattern of expressing both gratitude and sorrow for the high and low points of a single day can become a way of reflecting on any significant experience or period of time. You might do this after a special birthday, a conference, or a family reunion. You may choose to do this on a weekly, monthly or yearly basis taking a longer time for it, perhaps going to a retreat center or other special place. What an opportunity such a review of daily life, practiced regularly, becomes to cultivate an awareness of God's presence and gifts in all of life and to gather the fruit of our lives!



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## **2. Meditating with Scripture: Nurturing our lives**

These four movements are a slowdown method for listening for the Spirit’s prompting and to provide nurture of the heart. It is best to choose short passages.

- **READ** slowly letting the words soak in like gentle rain.
- **REFLECT** on a word, phrase or line when it strikes you; pause, ponder, savor the words and take note of how the Spirit is speaking to you.
- **RESPOND** to Jesus or the God of your understanding with a heartfelt conversation.
- **REST** in silence for a few moments, absorbing God’s love and light as you would the sun’s rays on a beach, and thank God for being with you.



## **3. Centering prayer or prayer of the heart**

This is the prayer of simply resting in God’s presence aware that the Spirit of God lives within us. One may experience being enfolded in love in the arms of God or coming home to God. A quiet repetition of a single word or phrase from Scripture can help us to become quiet within and to move to the center. Words such as “I am with you always” or “You are my beloved daughter (or son)” can slowly build a little nest in our hearts to stay there for the rest of the day. It is a prayer natural for those in the second half of life when the uncluttering of life and letting go are taking place.

## **4. Journaling: Writing our lives**

Writing can be one way of sifting through “the stuff of our lives” and getting on with significant developmental tasks or aging—life review work, reframing past failures and disappointments, honoring achievements, healing memories and dealing with unfinished business, not to forget preparing for our own death—tasks which we can actually start at any age. We can learn to listen to the inner elder for the wisdom accumulated from our own life story!

There is no “right way” of journaling. In my journals I find prayers, reflections on my day or on Scripture, dialogues with Jesus or with the inner child, or reflections on dreams. I have found it rewarding to spend time in nature being attentive to the gifts of creation and writing out my observations. If you

have difficulty writing, jot down a single thought for the day, perhaps a favorite quotation from Scripture or other reading which you can carry with you into the day.

## **5. Spiritual friendships: Sharing our lives**

Another way of harvesting our lives is in relationships such as with a spiritual friend or “soul friend” where there is mutual sharing. Each person takes a turn in talking and in listening to the other. My spiritual friend and I find helpful the following questions to focus our sharing:

- Where did I see God’s love/grace at work in my life and prayer since we last met?
- What obstacles did I experience?
- For what do I wish to be held accountable?
- Where do I sense the Spirit leading me?

Upholding each other in prayer becomes part of this relationship.

We can experiment with these and other ways of awakening to more grateful and centered living, of going deeper with oneself, others and God. Intercession is one way in which we can express our care for others and become a compassionate presence in the world right in our own living room! The real test of any spiritual discipline is not how well we have prayed, but the quality of our lives, our growth in trust, love and freedom.

What is the heritage of love we will leave the universe? How well will we tend the inner garden of our lives and bear fruit? My dream reminds me to find the keys that will unlock the door of my inner Home where God can be found and where the source of any gifts of love, gratitude and wisdom lies waiting for me.

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**"It is almost impossible to fathom our own death in spite of our cognitive awareness that all that lives must eventually die."**

## Facing our mortality

"I will be 95; will have an accident while touring Italy on my motorbike. I will skid on the road that is slippery because of all the olives that have fallen from the trees. I will go over an embankment into the ocean and drown."

The setting: A workshop on grief. The task: Write about your own death. One of my colleagues responded to the task with the opening story. It reflects our desire for youth, adventure, excitement and drama. Yet life is full of the ordinary events of daily living. We wish to avoid suffering, disability and awareness of the dying process. Yet, statistically, we know that if we survive childhood and young adulthood we are likely to die from disease, often preceded by a period of disabling illness, rather than dying instantaneously in an accident.

In this article I wish to address two dimensions of dealing with our mortality. First will be a brief discussion of conducting life in a manner that will manifest various aspects of immortality. Second, I want to provide some direction for helping others during the final weeks or months of living.

### **Living life in the face of our own mortality.**

Our God-given life force is extremely strong and determined. This has been evident to me innumerable times as I have watched terminally ill people struggle with every breath, often continuing to live beyond the health team's expectations and even the patient's own wishes. It is almost impossible to fathom our own death in spite of our cognitive awareness that all that lives must eventually die. We struggle to live as long as possible. When we realize it is no longer possible to live, we have an immense desire for immortality. This yearning for immortality takes several forms: faith, biology and works.

As Christians our *faith* reassures us that there is a resurrection and that we shall live eternally in a dimension that we can now only imagine very faintly. The calmness



and peace that comes from this belief has reassured countless believers throughout the ages as they faced their own death.

*Biologically* we pass on a bit of immortality to the next generation through our genes. For mothers this is particularly significant as we feel the unique tie to our children that comes from that intimate time during pregnancy. However, it is not necessary to pass on our biological genes to experience the immortality that comes from guiding and influencing the next generation. Teaching, modeling, mentoring, guiding and loving the younger generations passes on our values, ethics and faith. Everyone can do this through activities such as teaching in schools and churches, youth leadership, boys' and girls' clubs, babysitting, and neighborhood friendship.

We leave evidence of our *creativity and work* behind when we die. Some people have achieved measures of renown through books written, music composed or pictures painted. Few realize that level of fame. However, everyone creates some things that will remain long after their death. When grandmothers make a quilt for each grandchild, they know that quilt will provide warmth and memory long after they



"When grandmothers make a quilt for each grandchild, they know that quilt will provide warmth and memory long after they are gone. When a mother writes letters to each child to be given to them after her death, she knows that letter will be read, reread and treasured always."

are gone. When a mother writes letters to each child to be given to them after her death, she knows that letter will be read, reread and treasured always. While some deliberately plan to leave evidence of their existence, others may do so almost accidentally.

Immortality in this connotation is broader than the concept of heaven after death. It encompasses all of life, for how we live predicts how we will die. We leave behind legacies in the lives of the next generation, legacies that express our values, beliefs, unique skills, love, and special contributions to God's world. While we may not rate a page in the annals of history, we all can leave a positive mark on the lives of some of God's children.

#### Facilitating that final passage

As human finiteness comes into clearer personal focus due to advancing years or a potentially fatal illness, there are three main clusters of fears to be faced: loss of life, process of dying, and the unknown after death.

Fearing the *loss of life* includes mourning the loss of identity, mastery and control of self; dreading the separation; sensing incompleteness. Those of us who are the caregivers and loved ones of the dying address those fears by encouraging activities that ensure that this person will not lose identity or be forgotten. We can listen to their stories attentively. We can ask them to share specific recollections. It is important to validate their experiences and the impact they have on others. One example from my experience: An aged mother tells me how wonderful her daughters are and how well they look after her needs. I respond, "Sounds like they had an excellent example to emulate." She smiles shyly and quietly nods, hopefully reflecting on her positive achievements. Another example: A younger woman stresses how important attention to detail is for her, she asks numerous questions, each answer leading to a further question, all the while carefully taking notes. At one point I say to her, "I'll bet your cupboards are all organized and everything is in its place." She laughs. And then immediately responds in the affirmative with a comment that implies, "Hey, you've been listening and you know what kind of person I am and how I am unique." Listening actively and then giving expression to the importance of what the person has said and done that will ensure her place in the memories of her loved ones is a significant contribution toward ameliorating identified fears.

Fearing the *process of dying* relates to the fear of uncontrolled pain and other distressing symptoms. This topic in itself is worth a book, and there are many books written that address

this topic comprehensively. Today's technology can alleviate much of the distress; but dying is still not easy or pleasant. We can, however, assure our loved ones that we will not desert them, nor will they be left defenseless. As illness progresses I believe everyone needs a primary advocate to ensure that the best care available will be provided. Not all health care personnel or facilities are able to provide compassionate comfort measures that are directed at quality of life rather than quantity of days. Therefore, it may require shopping around for a physician who is well versed in palliative care techniques as well as finding a facility that provides such care. This care may be found in institutions or in support services for care in the private home.

Fearing the *after-death events* relates to concerns about the fate of the physical body, judgement and what will happen to the loved ones left behind. Today's society generally finds death a taboo topic. Families often struggle with a conspiracy



**"The dying person often broaches the topic through symbolic language to check whether it will be safe to pursue their thoughts."**

of silence in the face of approaching death. This leads to lost opportunities to share meaningful thoughts and feelings. The dying person often broaches the topic through symbolic language to check whether it will be safe to pursue their thoughts. Unfortunately, the symbolism may be misinterpreted as confusion and passed off as such. Consider the aged mother who talks about making sure all her children are safely in the house for the night. This sounds like confusion because her children are grown and independent. But if the caregiver stays with the symbolic language, she might ask the aged woman what needs to happen to make sure everyone is safe for the night. This may be the opener for her sharing deep concerns about past hurts, concerns about her children's lifestyles, or even concerns about her need to attend to household chores in spite of being reassured that someone is looking after those chores. Upon asking what still needs to be done, she perceives an openness to discuss her concerns about how the family will manage without her presence in the home. This can lead to a realistic discussion about practical ways to cope.

Fears may find expression in dreams. Dreams may be so disconcerting that the person is reluctant to discuss them. When becoming aware that a person has had a restless night, the caregiver can take time to explore the cause. Encourage verbalization of the dream, withholding any judgement. We do not need to be a dream analyst, and in fact we should avoid interpretation (unless qualified in this area.) Rather, ask the individual what she thinks the dream meant. Or, ask her what the pervading feeling was on waking up from the dream. Sometimes dreams involve people who have already died, and leave the dreamer with a warm reassurance that she is not going to be removed from loved ones, even after death.

Painful as some topics may be, openness to talking candidly about approaching death and future plans is very important. Making sure there is no unfinished business is crucial to facilitating a peaceful death. Women are often the primary care givers for the disabled, ill and dying. Hence we have that awesome privilege and responsibility to listen intently, to

respond in the same language being used by the one being cared for, and to promote safe passage ensuring that the significant issues have been addressed and there is no unfinished business.

In conclusion I will return to the same workshop with which I started this article. This was my response to the assignment.



## **My own death**

Not time, nor season,

Not circumstance, nor cause,

Nor how, nor wherefore.

These are the great unknowns.

The only known,

That it will be when it should be.

My role is to keep my house,  
my relationships to the loves of my life

And my God in order.

The rest, who knows?

It is better not to know.

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**"No more does the waitress ask if I qualify for a senior discount. She just looks at me."**

**"Advertisers urge me to apply creams to my face to avoid wrinkles. I am more concerned about what to apply to my soul to prevent it from becoming a shriveled sack of bitterness, regrets, criticism and irritability."**

by Katie Funk Wiebe

## When I am old, I want to be an elder

I write as an insider. No more does the waitress ask if I qualify for a senior discount. She just looks at me. I have crossed the border, but I don't know exactly when I did. I wrote about growing older when I was looking ahead to it. Now I know about aging firsthand. Some of my thinking has changed.

Personal experience of aging in a particular culture deeply shapes the way a person ages and what meaning it has for her or him. Within our society lies a deep dread and loathing of old age. It rubs off easily on those approaching this border. I've watched countless men and women do a soft shoe dance for several years, sometimes for decades, at that threshold. "Am I old yet or am I not old?" these people ask themselves. "When do I know I am old?"

Maybe they can keep old age at bay if they keep up the appearance of youthfulness and don't associate closely with their age group. People who see "old" as a four-letter word fight the cycle of life. They avoid identification with their years the way some people avoid tofu. Successful aging, in their thinking, is to keep middle age going into their 60s and 70s.

An elderly woman once advised me, "Don't worry about getting old. You'll get older whether you worry or not." Somehow it happens: "Now I am old."



My greatest concern is not whether I can slow time by hanging onto a youthful face and form, but whether I can keep growing inwardly. Advertisers urge me to apply creams to my face to avoid wrinkles. I am more concerned about what to apply to my soul to prevent it from becoming a shriveled sack of bitterness, regrets, criticism and irritability.

I see this stage of life as a time of grace. Old age is God's invention for completing the life cycle and preparing me for the step into eternity. I want to be able to praise God for this time of life. I want to experience the Gospel as good news to the end of life.

How is my inner life different now than it was 20 years ago when I was "in my prime"? Then I didn't have to pit our culture's views of my age against my own feelings about myself. Then I was still forging ahead as far as career and reputation were concerned. Then I was in daily contact with people. Then something was expected of me daily.

Now I am one of a vast group of amateurs at aging who are trying to figure out what aging is all about in a more positive way than what our culture informs us. At the turn of the century, life expectancy was below 50 years of age. At the turn of the next century, in three years, it will be in the early 80s for women and late 70s for men. My generation and those to come have been given an unexpected gift of years because of better nutrition, advanced medical technologies, and extended nursing home care. So if aging is grace, it is also a challenge.

I am tempted to reach back to imitate the way my mother aged. She never worked outside the home but moved through the life stages always very much engaged in the one same task: homemaking. Her identity never changed. Her relationships remained fairly stable. Yet I sense she worked at her aging. She remained alive and alert until her death at nearly age 99.

Somehow through the years my mother picked up the identity of "elder" in her congregation, not in the organizational structure, but in a spiritual sense. Everyone in her small congregation knew and respected Grandma Funk, one of the few old women in their midst. Yet she experienced increasing personal diminishment and disengagement from life. Aspects of aging troubled her.

Elderhood, according to Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Roland S. Miller in *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* is a state of consciousness that calls us "to engage in life completion, a

**"I often speak publicly about the need to release others through forgiveness to get out from under the load of unfair pain. One evening the Spirit told me it was time to forgive."**

**"Enough is enough. Enough doodads. Enough shopping. Enough adding to what I put on shelves and store in closets."**

process that involves specific tasks, such as coming to terms with our mortality, healing our relationships, enjoying our achievements, and leaving a legacy for the future." Taking on an identity as an elder is "an ongoing transformative process" enabling us to "harvest our lives, to bless all that we have lived through and to convert this rich experience into wisdom."

The authors write that elderhood enables older men and women to become "spiritually radiant, physically vital, and socially responsible elders of the tribe." I want to be an elder when I am old. I don't want to be a golden-ager, or a senior citizen, or even a retiree, someone who passes into a state of being who he or she is not. A retiree is not a teacher or a businessman.

I see that to become an elder is a big task, mostly a spiritual task. Yet my eldership and the eldership of today's "baby boomer" women will differ from that of my mother's. Boomer women will face the same kind of identity crisis on retirement as men leaving a profession. Yet these women have some decided advantages over men as they think of growing older.

They are more likely to be independent and self-sufficient, both financially and psychologically, than their mothers were. (Poverty, however, will remain a challenge to many single older women.) Today's women enjoy better decision-making skills. Unlike many men, they have practiced withdrawal and reentry into the work world all their lives. They will have spent more time in a greater variety of overlapping family roles than any generation in history—as child, spouse, parent, grandparent, stepparent. Boomer women are more likely than men to have learned the skill of caregiving, having throughout a lifetime looked after children, parents and even husbands. Some wives constantly monitor husband's bodies; they carry the pills, watch diets and so forth. They worry more about possible widowhood than their own health.

Yet, despite the differences between the ways men and women approach the latter years, spiritual tasks for both remain to become elders. The first, according to Schachter-

Shalomi and Miller is *life completion*. I see this as acknowledgement that death is not God's goof. It is not to be feared but to be accepted. My mother in the last weeks of her life when asked by a nurse where she wanted to go when released from the hospital said openly, "I want to go to be with the Lord." The puzzled nurse didn't know what she meant. But Mother knew she was ready to leave this life.

A second spiritual task older adults face is *healing relationships through forgiveness*. Some of us may have a special assignment in this regard.

In February 1997, I had a speaking engagement in Saskatoon, the place where many of my formative experiences of young adulthood took place. I found myself doing some intense soul-searching before going back to my old stomping grounds. Did I have anything to say to these people?

I often speak publicly about the need to release others through forgiveness to get out from under the load of unfair pain. One evening the Spirit told me it was time to forgive the Saskatoon Mennonite Brethren church council who, in 1946 after I had been elected leader of the youth group, asked me to resign. Something about the shape of my body made that task impossible.

"Forgive," urged the Spirit.

"But this story is a great way to poke fun at the paternalistic church system," I responded.

"Forgive," said the Spirit. "What is on their conscience, is their problem. Your task is to forgive." I forgave.

But that wasn't enough.

"Forgive the Canadian M.B. Youth Committee who refused to allow you to become editor of *The Youth Worker* because you were a woman even though you had been doing the work under your husband's name." I took care of that.

But even that didn't satisfy the Spirit. "What about the Sunday school superintendent who denied your request to teach a women's Sunday school class in Kitchener because women were not to teach in the church?" Would this list never end.

The spiritual task of some of us who carried the first blunt brunt of opposition and often trivialization of women's ministry is to forgive and not carry those burdens into the

**"A civilization can be killed in a few generations if no one passes on the wisdom of the elders."**

afternoon of life. For other women, other grudges and hurts may have stockpiled in their memories. Aging is a time to forgive and let go.

Another spiritual task is *simplification*. It means in essence at some point saying, "Enough is enough. Enough doodads. Enough remodeling and buying new. Enough shopping. Enough adding to what I put on shelves and store in closets." My mother taught me well here. As her life became more circumscribed, she indulged in a frenzy of getting rid of things that occupy space. No garage sales for her. Just give it away. She knew no moving van would accompany her coffin to the cemetery. Today's boomer women who never knew the Great Depression may have a harder time letting go of things because they have been hounded by consumerism all their lives.

*Harvesting one's life*, according to Schachter-Shalomi and Miller, is necessary for good living in old age. Real elders gravitate toward this task. Basically it means seeding the future with wisdom by sharing some of life's transforming moments. There is a great power in storytelling. A civilization can be killed in a few generations if no one passes on the wisdom (not just the information) of the elders.

I see this task as passing on my life smarts. Why hang onto my life after I have lived it? I do this through writing. Others do this through relationships with children, especially grandchildren, or mentoring younger women.

The all-encompassing task of elders then becomes *the need to craft one's life*, not just learn new crafts. The twin dangers of aging are isolation (because of widowhood) and self-pity, both of which lead to loneliness. Women bored and weary with life become boring and wearisome people—a species the other members of the human race soon avoid. Crafting one's life means remaining an interesting person because one is interested in others and in the shape one's life is taking. That includes developing a relationship with God and learning to love the silence of solitude.

In 1988, I wrote *Bless Me Too, My Father*. I was asking for a blessing from the church upon my life as a woman in her early 60s. I knew what I wanted and needed.

What a blessing should a 72-year-old woman ask of God? What about at 82? Or 92? Older women are in danger of

thinking they have no future, no dream. A look at the lives of some older women, especially those in nursing homes, limited to half a room, a few personal belongings, seems too stark, too empty. I fear becoming just another old woman.

What blessing do I want?

I want to see my aging as God's gift to me. I want to be an elder.

I want to see my age without stigma. I want to be able to stand tall as an elder because I am a child of God, made in God's image, worthy of respect from myself and others. I want the courage to reformat my thinking about aging so that this stage becomes a time of vibrant elderhood in a culture that speaks about it in empty euphemisms. For that I need companions on the untraveled road.

**Katie Funk Wiebe is a person on a journey trying to recognize the blessings and responsibilities of her mature years. She is Professor Emeritus at Tabor College, having taught there for 24 years. She now resides in Wichita, Kan., where she is a member of First Mennonite Brethren Church and active in older adult ministries.**



## News and verbs

- **Kathy Shantz has served as MCC Canada Women's Concerns director for eight years.** At a farewell celebration for Kathy in May, she was presented with a quilt and the following tribute, written by Rosemary McDonald.

A Quilt for Kathy  
A gift, a symbol, an ending, a beginning

It begins as a desire in a woman's heart  
It develops as a plan in her mind

The color, textures, patterns carefully,  
joyfully chosen . . .  
a feast for the senses . . . a world of possibilities

Measure, cut, trim and piece together  
The transformation begins

Sew piece-to-piece, block-to-block  
New connections made, solidified;  
The plan emerges.

Reject, re-cut, replace, repair, adjust  
New pieces, new blocks  
The woman's hands . . . inexorable motion

The top layer . . . a tribute to her craft  
The middle layer . . . the healing of hurting women  
The bottom layer . . . colleagues, committees,  
co-workers in the Lord

A beautiful design weaves through all the layers . . .  
joining, finishing  
The caress of the Creator's hand

It begins as a desire in a woman's heart  
It develops as a plan in her mind  
It becomes the breath of her soul

It is a gift to all of us who are being touched by her  
masterpiece.

Thank you, Kathy

- **Healing: Growing in the Land—Fourth Annual Retreat**

**A retreat for female survivors of childhood sexual abuse** is being held November 14–16, 1997. The retreat will be held at Kenbrook Bible Camp. The purpose is to encourage growth and healing through a deeper relationship with Christ. The weekend consists of workshops, process groups, worship, drama and fun.

Churches wishing to sponsor survivors from their congregations or to provide partial funding for another participant please contact a committee member, Mary 717-627-1611, Kim 717-238-8626 or Janet 717-665-7373.

Survivors wishing to receive information please write to: Spring of Hope, PO Box 69, Akron, PA 17501, or call a committee member. The retreat is sponsored by Kenbrook Bible Camp, Hope and Healing Ministries, MCC U.S. Women's Concerns, and retreat committee members.

- **"Daring Hope/Oser L'Espoir" 1998 Celebration**

**An ecumenical gathering to mark the close of the Decade** for Churches in Solidarity with Women in Church and Society is being planned for August 26–30, 1998, at the University of Guelph, Ontario.

Worship and workshops, speakers, singing and celebration will mark this event for women and men committed to women's full participation in the life of the church and in society as a whole. To obtain a registration brochure please send a self-addressed stamped envelope to: Registrar, Daring Hope, Ecumenical Decade Coordinating Group, 40 St. Clair Ave. E., Ste. 201, Toronto, Ontario, M4T 1M9.

- In May Dorothy Yoder Nyce received a Doctor of Ministry degree from Western Theological Seminary, Holland, Mich. Her thesis was **"Dialogues to Foster Interreligious Understanding."** She welcomes hearing from other women who share interest in communicating among living faiths. Contact her at 1603 So. 15th St., Goshen, Ind., 46526.

- The book *The Storekeeper's Daughter, a memoir by Katie Funk Wiebe*, is available from Herald Press (224 pages, In United States \$9.99, in Canada \$14.25). The author, editor, and Professor Emeritus at Tabor College retired in 1990 after teaching English for 24 years. Wiebe has long encouraged the writing of family stories. In *The Storekeeper's Daughter* she shares her own.

## Women in Ministry

**Jane Stoltzfus Buller** was ordained on June 8 at Walnut Hill Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind.

**Brenda Sawatzky Paetkau** was ordained May 18 as associate pastor at Eighth Street Church, Goshen, Ind.

**Esther Lanting** began as lead pastor at Hudson Lake Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind. on June 9. She was installed and licensed on July 20.

**Mary Ann Shreiner** was licensed as minister of senior adults and **Aldine Thomas** was licensed as minister of visitation at Clinton Frame Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind. on June 8.

**Patty Jo Friesen** became a pastor at Faith Church, Minneapolis, Minn., in July.

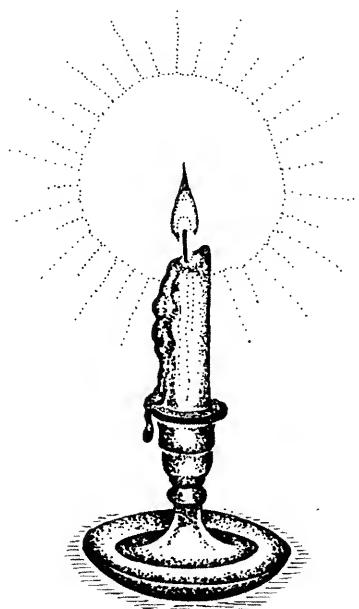
**Erlina Bowers** was a Bluffton (Ohio) College summer Ministry Inquiry Program intern at Grace Church, Pandora, Ohio.

### • Fourth Mennonite Arts Weekend

The Mennonite Arts Weekend will be held February 6-8, 1998, at Winton Woods Middle School, 147 Farragut Road, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Incorporating the theme, "Art in the Everyday," established artists, musicians and writers will present and discuss their work and issues related to their work.

*The Living Mirror* collection, edited by Suzanne Marie Hitt, will feature young Mennonite writers. An interactive forum will be led by poet Cynthia Yoder and artist Juanita Kauffman; and the premiere of a choral work by Janet Peachy will be performed by the Eastern Mennonite University Singers, conducted by Kenneth Nafziger. The weekend culminates in Sunday morning worship and a potluck dinner. The weekend is open to anyone interested in the arts. For more information, call Hal Hess: 513-351-8785.



## Letters

*Women's Concerns Report* welcomes your comments. Letters to the editor may be edited for length and clarity.

**from Sharon K. Heath in San Francisco, Calif.**

I have been a subscriber to the *Women's Concerns Report* at least since 1980. For many years, the *Report* has given me a view of the world from a perspective I may not have ever seen before, helping me to know and understand a little better how Christian women from other places or backgrounds experience their lives and understand Scripture. Because women from a wide range of cultures, backgrounds, experiences and interests write in each issue, the *Report* has given women a forum in which to tell their own stories and to write of their own concerns in their own voices. Giving voice to the voiceless is the essence, I believe, of feminist theology and has been the unique gift that the *Report* has given Mennonite and Brethren women—and men.

However, when I reviewed the six-year listing of past issues in the renewal notice of my most recent *Report* I was again struck by the fact that the *Report* still has not devoted an issue to the stories of Brethren and Mennonite lesbians. A review of the complete listing in the August 1993 issue bears me out.

The matter of the existence and place of lesbians within both Brethren and Mennonite traditions and our current denominations is without doubt a topic on which much has been written elsewhere, and it is a topic on which many of us disagree widely. It is certainly not a safe topic. But it is one that cries out for a listening ear, and what better place than the *Report* to hear the stories of Mennonite and Brethren lesbians, their mothers and sisters, their lovers, their friends and their pastors? We have powerful stories to tell, we who are lesbians and we who love them and pastor them.

I raised this issue with the former editor five years ago. At the time, she told me that the editorial board felt it was not yet ready to do an issue on Mennonite and Brethren

**Magdalena Widjaja** was ordained March 9 as pastor at Grace Chinese Fellowship, Regina, Sask.

**Anna Hemmendinger** ended a pastorate at Olive Branch Mennonite Church, Waterloo, Ont., in May.

**Mary Lou Simmons** was ordained at Ridgeway Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg, Va., on May 17. She will serve as interim chaplain at New Hanover Regional Medical Center in Wilmington, N.C.

**Grace and Paul Brunner** became interim pastors at Tabor Church, Newton, Kan., in August.

lesbians. Five years have past, and you are doing issues on books we like, but cannot find a place in the *Report* for us to talk about our lives. This is shameful. It is time that *Women's Concerns Reports* allowed us to tell our stories and that *Report* readers opened their hearts to hear them. It's not about theological agreement. It's about giving us a voice.

I hope that you will find a place within the next year for us to begin to tell our stories.

**From Edna Peters in Santa Cruz, Bolivia**

Dear Editor

*Women's Concern's Report* March-April 1997 just arrived at my desk in Bolivia. I have read and enjoyed receiving *Women's Concerns Report* since its earliest issues. It has been both interesting, stimulating and stretching for me and has helped me to better understand how other women hear God and where they find themselves in their faith journey.

There have also been times more recently when I felt myself losing touch with some of the issues being discussed in *Report*. Perhaps after 20 years of reading *Report* I had hoped we would move to being more inclusive, where men would be not only the occasional readers but contributors as well.

This last issue gives me a hint of why this may not be happening. In an otherwise interesting and informative publication I felt troubled when I read, "Eileen Klassen Hamm . . . lives with her partner Les . . ."

Although I realize Webster's Dictionary defines "partner" to include husband or wife, I find some of our acceptance of this more secular designation tends to further erode marriage and the family. You could just as easily have said that Eileen lives with her "husband" or "spouse" (and partner if you will) and their two children.

**From Nancy V. Lee in Tokyo, Japan**

I've been thinking about your March-April 1997 *Women's Concerns Report* since it arrived here. I was delighted to see an issue on books and book clubs, especially since books have opened so many windows for me into the lives of women (and, yes, a few men) in our international world. I wonder if, as someone who teaches in both Japan and China under Mennonite Board of Missions and China Educational Exchange, I could share with your readers a few of the authors and books important in my life.

#### CHINA

Harriet Burkholder, editor, the book about Dr. Yun Enmei, based on her conversations with Dorothy McCammon.

Jung Chang, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*.

Gail Copeland, *Spring Winds of Beijing*.

Jane Hunter, *The Gospel of Gentility: American Women Missionaries in the Turn-of-the Century China*.

Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl Wudunn, *China Wakes: The Struggle for the Soul of a Rising Power*.

Bette Bao Lord, *Legacies: A Chinese Mosaic*.

Steven W. Mosher, *A Mother's Ordeal: One Woman's Fight Against China's One-Child Policy*.

Sidney Rittenburg and Amanda Bennett, *The Man who Stayed Behind*.

Catherine Swift, *Gladys Aylward: The Courageous English Missionary Whose Life Defied All Expectations*.

Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Kitchen God's Wife* and (if you're brave) *The Hundred Secret Senses*.

Chihua Wen, *The Red Mirror: Children of China's Cultural Revolution*.

Jan Wong, *Red China Blues*.

Naomi Woronov, *China Through My Window*.

Ningkun Wu with his wife, Yikai Li, *A Single Tear: A Family's Persecution, Love and Endurance in Communist China*.

**Illustrations in this issue were drawn by Teresa Pankratz of Chicago. Please do not reproduce without permission.**

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## JAPAN

Elizabeth Bumiller, *The Secrets of Mariko: A Year in the Life of a Japanese Woman and Her Family*.

Cathy N. Davidson, *36 Views of Mount Fuji: On Finding Myself in Japan*.

Anne E. Imamura, editor, *Re-imaging Japanese Women*  
Sumiko Iwao, *The Japanese Woman: Traditional Image and Changing Reality*.

Mary Kimoto Tomita, *Dear Miye: Letters Home from Japan, 1939-1946*.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committees on Women's Concerns. We believe that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committees strive to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures through which women and men can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committees on Women's Concerns.

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## OTHERS

Elizabeth Bumiller, *May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons: A Journey among Women in India*.

Eva Fogelman, *Conscience and Courage: Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust*.

Thoma Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*.

Madeleine L'Engle, especially *Two-Part Invention: The Story of a Marriage*, her trilogy including *The Irrational Season*, her books based on stories in Genesis and *Story as Truth*.

Ann Zwicker Kerr, *Come with Me from Lebanon: An American Family Odyssey*.

Betty Mahmoody, *Not Without My Daughter* and *For the Love of a Child*.

Jean Sasson, *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia* and *Daughters of Arabia*

Pat Schneider, *The Writer as an Artist: A New Approach in Writing Alone and with Others*.

Joyce Merrill Valdes, *Culture Bound: Bridging the Cultural Gap in Language Teaching*.

The autobiographical works of Barbara Bush, Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter, Walter Cronkite and Margaret Thatcher.



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